

# **MODEL SYLLABUS: UNDERGRADUATE-FOR-GRADUATE CREDIT COURSE\***

## **ENGLISH 480: CREATIVE NONFICTION WORKSHOP SPACES AND PLACES: WRITING ABOUT THE AMERICAN WEST, WRITING ABOUT HOME**

**SAM HOUSTON STATE UNIVERSITY  
SUMMER MINIMESTER 2010  
MAY 18-JUNE 1, 2010**

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### **COURSE DESCRIPTION:**

There is something about the landscape of the American West. It is vast and spacious, marked by the seemingly limitless sky, the broad expanse of undeveloped lands, the dramatic uplift of rocks millions of years old, the lavender-hued mountains, the salt flats, the way light changes everything. It is a land of desert and red rock, of pine and lush green valleys, of water and no water. It is mythic and modern, a two-lane blacktop road past ruins ancient and contemporary, a million pottery shards, dozens of abandoned motor courts. It is a land with a complex history, the interaction of Native Americans and Spanish conquistadors, Mexican farmers and Anglo settlers, the Old West and the New West, the Atomic West and the West Yet to Come.

In this course, we will go into the American West and we will read authors who have written about the West and their relationship to it, both personally and communally, in fiction, poetry, and essays. We will write about our own experience within landscape—the landscape of the West, but also the landscapes from which we come, whether the Piney Woods of East Texas, the flat corn-fed plains of the Upper Midwest, or the urban environs of a city like Houston or its ever-expanding suburbs. We will think about what it means to live in a particular place at a particular time, and we will study how writers look closely at the landscape (or the cityscape) and how they write about what they find there—nature, the environment, sure, but also history, the interaction of man with those landscapes. We will consider the way man has attempted to shape the land to his own purposes—whether those purposes be physical, emotional, or spiritual, or economic, political, or environmental.

We will discuss what it means to be from someplace and to go to another place. We will discuss the ways writers make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. We will discuss the ethics of travel writing, the politics of representation—who has the right to write about this place and these people? What grants the traveling writer the authority to speak? We will consider our own relationship as Americans to the history and cultures of the American West, and, in like fashion, to our communities. And we will write. We will write what is known as creative nonfiction, a genre that uses the tools we typically associate with the art of fiction—narrative, scene, dialogue, metaphor, plot—to describe, reflect upon, analyze, and re-create our experiences in relationship to our spaces and places.

We will hike. We will camp. We will, in short, immerse ourselves in the American West.

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\* Extra readings and assignments required for graduate credit are highlighted in yellow below.

## **COURSE OBJECTIVES:**

1. To study the craft of creative nonfiction in its variety of forms, with an emphasis on writing about spaces and places, particularly the American West;
2. To read and analyze various models of writing about spaces and places (including literary journalism, memoir, personal essay, history, and nature writing), so that may students may understand the flexibility of the form and its attendant possibilities;
3. To expand a student's vision of the world by taking him or her to new communities, new cultures, and new landscapes, and asking him or her to engage critically with those communities, cultures, and landscapes;
4. To shape a student's understanding of the relationship between texts and contexts, including the writer himself or herself as one particular context;
5. To develop students' critical thinking and writing skills, both at the macro and the micro level;
6. To engage the student in reflection and writing about his or her own relationship to spaces and places;
7. To produce student works of creative nonfiction from generative exercises to initial ideas to early drafts and on through revision to polished essays.

## **TENTATIVE ITINERARY:**

May 17—Huntsville  
May 18—Lamar, Colorado (approximate location)  
May 19—Denver/Leadville, Colorado  
May 20—Leadville, Colorado  
May 21—Ouray, Colorado  
May 22, 23—Arches National Park  
May 24—Mexican Hat, Utah  
May 25—Acoma, New Mexico  
May 26—Chaco Canyon, New Mexico  
May 27, 28—Santa Fe, New Mexico  
May 29—Taos, New Mexico  
May 30—Abiquiu, New Mexico  
May 31—Balmorhea State Park (or Ft. Davis State Park), Texas  
June 1—Huntsville

## **REQUIRED TEXTS:**

All Students:

*On the Road*, by Jack Kerouac  
*Desert Solitaire*, by Edward Abbey  
*Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko  
*River of Traps*, by William deBuys

Graduate Students:

*The Nonfictionist's Guide: On Reading and Writing Creative Nonfiction*, by Robert Root

## **GRADUATE STUDENT READING ASSIGNMENTS PACKET:**

From *The Art of the Personal Essay*, ed. Phillip Lopate, "Seeing," by Annie Dillard (pp. 692-706).  
From *The Solace of Open Spaces*, by Gretel Ehrlich, "The Solace of Open Spaces" (pp. 1-15)  
From *A Sense of Place, A Sense of Time*, by John Jackson Brickerhoff, "Seeing New Mexico" (pp. 15-25).  
From *Horizontal Yellow*, by Dan Flores, "Inventing the Southwest in Abiquiu" (chapter 6, pp. 201-252).

From *The Myth of Santa Fe: Creating a Modern Regional Tradition*, by Chris Wilson  
From *How the Canyon Became Grand*, by Stephen J. Pyne  
From *West of Everything*, by Jane Tompkins, “At the Buffalo Bill Museum, June 1988” (pp. 179-203)  
From *The Contested Plains*, by Elliott West (Part II: The Gold Rush, pp. 97-170).  
From *The Modern West: American Landscapes, 1890-1950*, by Emily Ballew Neff (Prologue).  
From *Sand Creek*, by Simon Ortiz  
From *Lasso the Wind*, by Timothy Egan, “Plymouth Rock West” (pp. 33-47)  
From *Refuge*, by Terry Tempest Williams, “The Clan of One-Breasted Women” (pp. 281-290).  
From *Blood and Thunder*, by Hampton Sides (Chapters on Canyon de Chelley and The Long March).

## **GRADES:**

Attendance and Participation (40 percent): Given the nature of this trip, nearly half of the grade for the class will be based on attendance and participation. This includes not only the specifically academic elements of the course—the readings and the discussions, the lectures and the exercises—but the communal aspects—putting up and breaking down camp; making meals and washing dishes; hiking and touring; being a good citizen and a good companion. It means carrying one’s own weight on the trip—and then some.

Journal, including writing exercises (20 percent): Students will be required to keep a daily journal about their experiences on the trip. This should not just be a log of events, but should include reflection, critical analysis, and opinion. In many respects, the journal should serve as a place where initial thoughts and ideas for the essays begin to take shape and where writing exercises are performed, but it should not be limited to the material that will find its way into the essays. It should be a personal record of this experience as well. Each day the students will be given a writing exercise—perhaps in relationship to the essays to be discussed that day, perhaps in relationship to a specific element of the craft of nonfiction writing, perhaps in relationship to the places we are visiting that day or visited the day before. The purpose of the exercises is to allow the students to focus on a particular element of the craft of writing, just as a basketball coach might spend an entire practice focused on rebounding drills or the way a music teacher might spend an hour on embouchure. The bulk of these exercises will be included in the journal, but on occasion the professor will require students to share with the class relatively polished versions of the exercises.

Two Essays (15 percent each, 30 percent total): Students will be required to write two essays, the final drafts of each which will be due two weeks from the date we arrive back in Huntsville (so they’re due June 18). During the trip itself, students should be reading closely, making notes, participating in the discussions of craft, and writing initial drafts of their essays. (Since we will not be carrying computers along on the trip, you should expect to write your initial drafts the old-fashioned way—which is to say, by long-hand.) Each of the essays should balance personal narrative and critical reflection. See assignment sheet for more detail.

Group Presentation (10 percent): Each student will be placed in a small group that will provide a presentation to the class on a book-length work of fiction or nonfiction, as listed above. The presentations will approach the books not only in terms of content, but in terms of craft, asking not just what does the author say, but how does he or she say it. We will read these books not just for what the authors have to say about the West, but as models for various approaches to writing about a particular place. See assignment sheet for more detail.

**PAPER FORMAT:**

The final essays should be typed double-spaced in a 12-point font with one-inch borders AND STAPLED. No wacky fonts, please. Any assignments longer than two pages must have page numbers. Correct grammar, usage, punctuation and spelling are expected. Work flawed by pervasive mechanical errors will be penalized accordingly. Always be certain to keep a hard copy and a copy on disk. Title all essays. In the upper right-hand corner, type your name, e-mail address, and the essay's word count.

**TIMELY SUBMISSIONS:**

The journal and the essays are due by 5 p.m., June 11, 2010. Any late work will be penalized one full grade for each day it is late. Failure to submit any of the work will result in a zero for that portion of the work. Extensions will be granted only in cases of emergency.

**ACADEMIC DISHONESTY AND PLAGIARISM:**

Academic honesty is fundamental to the activities and principles of a university. All members of the academic community must be confident that each person's work has been responsibly and honorably acquired, developed, and presented. Any effort to gain an advantage not given to all students is dishonest whether or not the effort is successful. The academic community regards academic dishonesty as an extremely serious matter, with serious consequences that range from probation to expulsion. When in doubt about plagiarism, paraphrasing, quoting, or collaboration, consult the course instructor. *See Student Syllabus Guidelines* (<http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus>).

**AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT:**

It is the policy of Sam Houston State University that individuals otherwise qualified shall not be excluded, solely by reason of their disability, from participation in any academic program of the university. Further, they shall not be denied the benefits of these programs nor shall they be subjected to discrimination. Students with disabilities that might affect their academic performance are expected to visit with the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities located in the Counseling Center. *See Student Syllabus Guidelines* (<http://www.shsu.edu/syllabus>).

**ASSIGNMENT SHEET**  
**DR. KAUKONEN**  
**WEST TRIP**  
**ENGLISH 480W**  
**CREATIVE NONFICTION**

**THE NATURE OF CREATIVE NONFICTION:**

As Robert Root discusses in the opening chapter of *The Nonfictionist's Guide*, the definition of creative nonfiction remains contested, and the term can be applied to a wide-range of forms. It may include “the personal essay, the memoir, narrative reportage, and expressive critical writing and whose borders with other reality-based genres and forms (such as journalism, criticism, history, etc.) are fluid and malleable.” It may adopt the narrative techniques of fiction and the lyricism of poetry; it may be written in linear fashion, or it may be structured to resemble a triptych or a mosaic or a collage. The author may stand at the center of the essay or may stand on the fringe. This provides you, in these assignments, a great deal of latitude, which can be both freeing and terrifying. In this assignment sheet, I will provide for you some basic parameters that should help you focus your essays, but as with all creative work, we will primarily seek a form that allows you to express your ideas and experiences in the most effective manner rather than attempting the reverse—to fit your ideas and experiences into some pre-made form.

Let's start with the most basic requirements. By June 11, ten days after we return, you will have provided me with two distinct essays, each a minimum of ten double-spaced pages (or roughly 2500 words). Each should fit within the confines of Root's rather broad definition of creative nonfiction: “the written expression of, reflection upon, and/or interpretation of observed, perceived, or recollected experience.” Both essays should emerge from your experiences on this trip, including your engagement with the readings, lectures, and discussions (both formal and informal), though the essays should not be limited to your experience of this trip. As creative nonfiction, both essays should focus upon your own relationship to the subject matter at hand. This is not third-person, so-called “objective” academic writing. Creative nonfiction recognizes that there is always a first-person, “subjective” author through whose filter (or eyes) we're being shown some element of the world. In the best creative nonfiction, it is not merely first-person naval-gazing either. It is not just about you, but rather about the subject matter you've chosen to write about, including your relationship to that subject matter. Your responsibility is to make the subject matter and your relationship to it vivid and interesting to your audience. It may be vivid and interesting to you, because it is, in part, about you, but that's not the same thing as making it vivid and interesting to a disinterested audience. As with all creative writing, we will seek to provide some small insight into the human condition, and to do so with originality, and in a form that best expresses those insights.

**ESSAY ABOUT PLACE:**

One of the essays should focus upon the experience of place. It may include reflection upon the places where you have lived or worked or gone to school, places we travel through on this trip, and/or the relationship between those places. When we refer to this as the “West Trip,” we are defining the course by place—a geographical region of the United States, in this case, but a place that is also an idea—the American West. It's a region of sublime landscapes, both awe-inspiring and terrifying (the definition of the sublime), a region with a bloody, complex, and highly contested history (and present). It has long been (mis)represented in movies and books and music. It is a region of myth and battle, preconceived notions and hard realities. It is a region of wealth and poverty, trails and interstates. To write about a place, you must first attempt to understand it.

Your experience of the West on this trip will not take place in isolation; rather, it will be shaped by your past experiences and ideas and desires—in short, by who you are. Some of you may be returning to regions in which you've previously lived or visited; some of you may be leaving Texas for the first time, sludging through a snowstorm for the first time. Some of you may have been raised in city landscapes or lost in suburban sprawl; others of you may have been raised in flatland rural farm country. Which means that you will all have something different to say.

### **ESSAYS ABOUT A SUBJECT:**

The second essay should engage with a subject or theme that emerges from the trip—perhaps something concerned with environmental history or political history, an element of nature or of man's construction.

Examples of the latter category might include Jane Tompkins' essay about her visit to the Buffalo Bill Museum in Cody, Wyoming; Timothy Egan's literary journalism about Acoma Pueblo; or the writings in Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*. *River of Traps*, by William deBuys, manages to incorporate both kinds of writing over the course of its pages.

### **FORM:**

For both essays, you will have available for you all the tools in a creative nonfiction writer's toolbox (we will discuss these as we go along)—narrative, dialogue, plot, scene and summary, poetic language, analysis, reflection, research, interviews, the present and the past, etc.

### **EXERCISES:**

As we travel, I will provide you with an extensive collection of exercises—the goal is to provide you with a substantial new exercise each day. You should compose these exercises in your writing journal. These are not intended to be polished pieces of writings. They are, I'd like to think, opportunities. Quite often, the most difficult challenge a writer faces is the blank page. You can write anything. You can do anything. And so how do you know where to begin? The various exercises that I will give you will attempt to address that problem. They are intended to get things jump-started. Some you may love; some you may be indifferent to. Some may prove to be incredibly productive for you; some may prove to be incredibly productive for others, but not for you. When I look at your writing journals at the end, I will look these over. They will not be graded for quality, but simply for effort—did you make the attempt? Those who do the exercises will undoubtedly be producing the raw material for the polished essays that will represent your deepest engagement with the trip. One of the most difficult challenges for a writer outside the context of an academic class is to have the discipline to return day after day to the page; I will push you on this trip and in this class to develop that discipline.

For a writer, everything is potential material. The challenge is to turn that raw material—those experience, those observations, those interpretations—into an essay that engages your reader and affects them in some way.

**ASSIGNMENT SHEET  
GROUP PRESENTATIONS  
DRS. KAUKONEN AND CRANE  
WEST TRIP 2010**

We both believe that your education is your responsibility, and while it is our responsibility to create an environment conducive to that achievement, it is not our responsibility to merely serve as a conduit of knowledge that passes somehow, magically, from us to you. So while we will lecture and lead discussions, we expect our students to take responsibility for the class and for their own education, both individually and as a group. To this end, we require each student to take the lead on one of the books that form the core of the trip's readings, and to present that work to the class in conjunction with two or three other students. The presentations should reflect a deep engagement with the work, should respond critically to the issues raised by the work, and should be done as professionally as possible (even without the availability of PowerPoint; yes, that is possible).

There will be two aspects to each presentation, reflecting the two classes that together make up the trip. One aspect we might define as the "content" of the book, which will focus on what the book says, while the other we might define as the "art and craft" of the book, which will focus on how the writer says what he or she has to say. For example, a presentation about the "content" of *River of Traps* might focus upon the Las Trampas Land Grant or the way in which the book illustrates the changes in the economies of northern New Mexican villages over the course of the Twentieth Century or the inter-generational relationship between William deBuys and Jacobo Romero. A presentation on the "art and craft" of *River of Traps* might focus upon the relationship between the lyrical cantos (the inter-chapters) and the book's central narrative, or it might examine the way deBuys incorporates archival research, formal and informal interviews, and personal observation and experience in the creation of the book, and the way he weaves these various strands together, or it might focus upon the way deBuys writes about the landscape and the people in it. The latter aspect should be the focus of students enrolled in the creative writing course who are studying *River of Traps* as a model of a certain kind of creative nonfiction, while the former should be the focus of students enrolled in the history course who might be most interested in what deBuys reveals about the history of El Valle and the surrounding region as it changed over the course of the Twentieth Century.

Each presentation should include the following aspects: (1) Description. Though each course packet will include an excerpt from each book and though a significant number of students will read each book, the presentation should provide a brief overview of the book that's rooted in summary, but is not mere summary. It should not bother with a blow-by-blow, chapter-by-chapter account, but should efficiently summarize the book's central concerns (or thesis, if it can be said to have one) and the manner by which the author goes about this task. What, in brief, does the author have to say and how does he or she say it? (2) Analysis. As readers of the book, you are not merely vessels through whom the information flows to be distilled and summarized for your peers. You should actively contextualize, interpret, and critique the work. What is the significance of this work in the context of this course? What connections might you make between this work and others that we read or that you have read? How do these works fit into the larger conversation about the American West? About creative nonfiction? How do they reinforce or challenge prevailing attitudes or ideas? (3) Personal response. This isn't merely to ask whether or not you like or do not like the book, or whether you agree or disagree in some way, but to acknowledge that our responses to literature are often shaped, even in ways we might not yet be aware of, by who we are, what we (think we) know, and what our prior experiences have been. Though for our purposes we would place the greater focus of the presentations on items 1 and 2, we would not exclude the validity of 3.

Each presentation should incorporate significant contributions from each member and should take approximately 45 minutes, with time for questions from the class to follow.